Rodentz

Book 3

By Reggie Hoffpauir

PROLOGUE

The Ones Who Came Back

The rain had been falling for three days.

Hawthorne Academy looked different beneath it.

The old school had once been a place of classrooms, football games, detention slips, cafeteria lunches, and ordinary teenage arguments.

Now it was a fortress.

Barricades surrounded the campus. Watchtowers had been built from old construction equipment. The windows on the lower floors had been reinforced with steel.

And everywhere, there were hybrids.

A girl with feathers instead of hair carried boxes through the cafeteria.

A boy with reptilian eyes stood watch beside the front gate.

Two fox hybrids hurried through the rain with medical supplies.

They were building a new life.

But nobody believed the war was over.

Max Hawthorne stood on the roof of the science building, staring toward the distant city.

His black-and-white opossum ears twitched beneath the hood of his jacket.

Beside him sat Suna.

Her quills had grown longer since the last battle.

She had learned how to control them, mostly.

Mostly.

“You’ve been staring at that city for an hour,” Suna said.

Max didn’t look at her.

“I know.”

“Something bothering you?”

“Everything.”

Suna smiled faintly.

“That’s not very specific.”

Max finally looked at her.

“Megan is gone.”

Suna’s smile disappeared.

They both knew what that meant.

Gone didn’t necessarily mean dead.

And if Megan was alive, somewhere beyond the city, she had every reason to hate them.

“We won,” Suna said.

Max shook his head.

“No.”

He looked toward the horizon.

“We survived.”

A siren suddenly screamed across the campus.

Both of them stood.

Red lights flashed below.

A voice came over the loudspeaker.

“UNIDENTIFIED VEHICLES APPROACHING THE EAST GATE.”

Max’s expression hardened.

“Stay here.”

Suna immediately followed him.

“You know I hate when you say that.”

They raced downstairs.

Outside the eastern gate, three battered vans were approaching through the rain.

The guards raised their weapons.

Max stepped forward.

“Don’t fire!”

The first van stopped.

Its rear doors opened.

A dozen exhausted hybrids climbed out.

Some were wounded.

Some were carrying bags.

And then Max saw her.

A girl stepped from the van.

She had long rabbit ears that drooped beneath the rain.

White fur covered parts of her arms and neck.

She looked exhausted.

But her eyes were sharp.

Max stared.

The rabbit girl stared back.

“Are you Max Hawthorne?”

“Yes.”

She walked toward him.

“My name is Amy.”

She pointed toward the road behind her.

“And you need to lock that gate.”

Max frowned.

“Why?”

Amy looked over her shoulder.

“Because something followed us.”

A distant sound echoed through the rain.

Not a human voice.

Not an animal.

Something mechanical.

Max’s ears lifted.

Suna’s quills rose.

Amy whispered:

“They’re here.”

CHAPTER ONE

The Rabbit

The gates slammed shut.

Max barely had time to ask Amy another question before the lights around the academy flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then every light went out.

Darkness swallowed Hawthorne Academy.

Someone screamed.

“Everyone stay calm!” Max shouted.

Emergency lights clicked on.

The academy became a maze of red shadows.

Amy stood beside Max.

“How many?”

Max looked at her.

“What?”

“How many people are here?”

“About four hundred.”

Amy’s face tightened.

“Then we’re in trouble.”

Suna stepped closer.

“You said something followed you.”

Amy nodded.

“They weren’t human.”

Max frowned.

“Hybrids?”

“No.”

Amy looked toward the gate.

“They were machines.”

A loud metallic impact shook the building.

Everyone froze.

Another impact.

The eastern gate bent inward.

Max immediately started issuing orders.

“Get everyone underground. Medical team to the shelter. Nobody goes outside.”

Suna looked at Amy.

“And us?”

Max sighed.

“You two stay with me.”

Amy smiled.

“Good.”

Max blinked.

“Good?”

“I’d rather see what we’re dealing with.”

“You’ve known me for five minutes.”

“Six.”

Suna almost laughed.

Max looked annoyed.

Amy smiled.

For the first time in weeks, Suna saw something different in Max’s expression.

He was nervous.

But he was also interested.

The gate shook again.

Then something punched through it.

A metallic hand appeared between the bars.

Suna stepped backward.

“What is that?”

Max didn’t answer.

The hand slowly pulled itself through.

It belonged to something shaped almost like a human.

Almost.

Its body was covered in dark armor.

A single blue light glowed where its face should have been.

Then another appeared.

And another.

Five machines stood outside the academy.

Amy whispered:

“They found us.”

Max raised his weapon.

“Then we’ll make sure they regret it.”

CHAPTER TWO

Luke

Suna met Luke three days later.

She was sitting alone in the library.

The academy had become strangely quiet after the attack.

Repairs were underway.

Classes had resumed.

But everyone was watching the windows.

Suna was reading when something dropped onto the table.

She jumped.

A small wooden box sat in front of her.

She looked around.

Nobody.

Then a voice came from above.

“Don’t open it.”

Suna looked up.

A chipmunk hybrid was hanging upside down from the ceiling.

He had brown fur around his face, a striped tail, and enormous nervous eyes.

Suna stared.

He stared back.

“Hi.”

“How are you doing that?”

“Climbing?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

He shrugged.

“Pretty good.”

He dropped onto the table.

“I’m Luke.”

Suna looked at the box.

“What’s inside?”

Luke’s face became serious.

“That’s complicated.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No.”

“Explosive?”

“No.”

“Alive?”

Luke hesitated.

“…Maybe.”

Suna slowly pushed the box away.

Luke laughed.

“I’m kidding.”

Suna stared at him.

He immediately stopped laughing.

“Mostly.”

She couldn’t help it.

She smiled.

Luke smiled too.

“I’m Suna.”

“I know.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You know who I am?”

“Everyone knows who you are.”

Suna looked down.

“I don’t really like that.”

Luke’s voice softened.

“Yeah. I figured.”

He sat beside her.

For a moment neither spoke.

Then Luke pointed toward her book.

“What’s that?”

“History.”

“That’s boring.”

“You climbed onto a ceiling to talk to someone reading history.”

Luke thought about that.

“Fair point.”

Suna laughed.

And neither of them noticed Amy standing in the doorway.

She watched them for a moment.

Then smiled.

CHAPTER THREE

Max and Amy

Max didn’t understand Amy.

That bothered him.

He understood enemies.

He understood soldiers.

He understood fear.

He understood responsibility.

Amy didn’t seem to understand any of those things.

At least, that’s what he thought.

She was sitting on the academy’s highest wall, looking down at the training yard.

Max climbed up beside her.

“You shouldn’t be up here.”

Amy looked at him.

“Neither should you.”

“I’m responsible for this place.”

“And I’m responsible for myself.”

Max frowned.

“You always argue?”

“Only when you’re wrong.”

“I wasn’t wrong.”

Amy smiled.

“You were.”

Max sighed.

“You’re exhausting.”

“You’re welcome.”

He looked at her.

Amy looked back.

For several seconds neither spoke.

Then Max laughed.

It surprised him.

He hadn’t laughed like that in a long time.

Amy smiled.

“There.”

“What?”

“You needed that.”

Max looked away.

“Maybe.”

Amy nudged his shoulder.

“You’re allowed to be a teenager, Max.”

He looked at her.

“Sometimes I forget.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“Because I was the same way.”

Max’s expression changed.

“You?”

Amy nodded.

“Before I came here, I took care of my little brother. My parents were captured.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

She looked toward the horizon.

“But I learned something.”

“What?”

“You can’t protect everyone.”

Max was silent.

Amy turned toward him.

“You can love them.”

Max looked into her eyes.

“But you can’t control whether the world hurts them.”

He didn’t know what to say.

For once, Amy had left him without an answer.

And somehow, he liked that.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Message

That night, every screen in Hawthorne Academy turned on.

Nobody touched them.

The televisions.

The computers.

The hallway monitors.

All of them displayed the same symbol.

A black circle.

Inside it was a white rat.

Then a voice began.

“To the hybrids hiding inside Hawthorne Academy.”

Max froze.

Suna stood beside him.

Amy joined them.

Luke came running down the hallway.

The voice continued.

“You believe the humans are your enemy.”

The screen flickered.

“You are wrong.”

A photograph appeared.

A laboratory.

Hundreds of containment chambers.

Inside them were hybrids.

Some were children.

Some were adults.

Some had never been allowed to leave.

Suna covered her mouth.

Luke whispered:

“What is that?”

The voice continued.

“The transformation was never random.”

Max stared at the screen.

“What?”

“One out of every nine.”

The screen displayed genetic charts.

“That number was selected.”

Amy stepped closer.

“Selected by who?”

The voice laughed softly.

“By the people who created you.”

The screen went black.

Then one final message appeared.

MEGAN WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Underground

Max called an emergency meeting.

Every leader in the academy gathered in the auditorium.

Suna sat beside Luke.

Amy sat beside Max.

Nobody spoke.

Finally, Max stood.

“We have confirmation that the hybrid transformations were engineered.”

The room erupted.

“What does that mean?”

“Who created us?”

“Are there more experiments?”

“Are humans responsible?”

Max raised his hands.

“We don’t know.”

A voice from the crowd shouted:

“Then find out!”

Max looked around.

“We will.”

Amy stood beside him.

“But we can’t do it by charging into another war.”

Max looked at her.

She continued.

“We need information.”

Suna raised her hand.

Everyone turned.

“I know where we can start.”

Max stared at her.

“Where?”

Suna looked toward the floor.

“The old laboratory.”

The room became silent.

The laboratory where Suna’s transformation had first been studied.

The laboratory where Alex had once warned her that her mutation was developing faster than expected.

Suna looked at Max.

“I think they left something behind.”

Luke reached over and gently touched her hand.

Suna looked down at their hands.

Then back at him.

She smiled.

Max noticed.

So did Amy.

Amy whispered:

“Looks like we’re not the only ones with problems.”

Max gave her a confused look.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

CHAPTER SIX

Into the Dark

The expedition consisted of six hybrids.

Max.

Suna.

Amy.

Luke.

Two scouts.

They traveled underground through an abandoned railway tunnel.

The deeper they went, the colder it became.

Luke walked beside Suna.

“Are you scared?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

She looked at him.

“Good?”

“It means you’re paying attention.”

Suna smiled.

“You talk too much.”

“I’ve been told.”

Amy walked several yards ahead with Max.

“You like her,” Amy whispered.

Max looked at her.

“Who?”

“Suna.”

“What? No.”

Amy laughed.

“Not her.”

Max looked confused.

“You like Suna like a sister.”

He relaxed.

“Oh.”

Amy smiled.

“You’re terrible at this.”

“At what?”

“People.”

Max shook his head.

“You’re impossible.”

Amy’s ears twitched.

“Maybe.”

A sound echoed through the tunnel.

Everyone stopped.

Luke whispered:

“What was that?”

Something moved in the darkness.

Max raised his weapon.

“Stay behind me.”

A tiny creature stepped into the light.

It was a mouse hybrid.

Barely old enough to be walking.

Suna lowered her weapon.

“He’s a child.”

The boy stared at them.

Then he whispered:

“Are you from Hawthorne?”

Max nodded.

“Yes.”

The boy began to cry.

“They took everyone else.”

Suna knelt beside him.

“Who?”

The boy pointed deeper into the tunnel.

“The people underground.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Facility

They found the laboratory beneath an abandoned hospital.

It was enormous.

Too enormous.

Thousands of rooms stretched beneath the earth.

Files covered the walls.

Photographs.

Genetic charts.

Names.

Dates.

Numbers.

And then Suna found hers.

SUBJECT S-09

She stared at the photograph.

Her younger face looked back at her.

Luke stood beside her.

“Suna…”

She touched the glass.

“They knew.”

Max looked at another file.

His expression changed.

“What?”

Amy asked.

Max held up the document.

There were thousands of names.

Each one had a number.

One through nine.

Amy looked at Suna.

“Why nine?”

Suna shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

Then the lights came on.

A voice echoed through the laboratory.

“Because nine is the number of survival.”

Max turned.

A woman stood at the end of the hallway.

She wore a white coat.

But she wasn’t human.

She had gray fur.

Large ears.

And a long rat-like tail.

Max raised his weapon.

“Who are you?”

The woman smiled.

“My name is Dr. Evelyn Voss.”

She looked at Suna.

“And I’ve been waiting for you.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Truth About Suna

Dr. Voss explained everything.

The hybrids weren’t an accident.

The original genetic experiment had been designed to create organisms capable of adapting to rapidly changing environments.

The first experiments had failed.

The ninth generation hadn’t.

Children were born carrying dormant hybrid genes.

At a certain age, those genes activated.

Suna listened silently.

“So we’re experiments.”

Dr. Voss shook her head.

“Not anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you became something your creators didn’t understand.”

Suna looked at her.

“What?”

Dr. Voss pointed toward Suna’s quills.

“Adaptation.”

Luke stepped closer.

“She’s different.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Dr. Voss looked frightened.

“Because Suna’s mutation isn’t finished.”

Suna felt cold.

“What happens when it is?”

Dr. Voss didn’t answer.

Max stepped forward.

“Tell us.”

Dr. Voss looked toward the ceiling.

“They’re coming.”

A distant alarm began.

The machines had found them.

CHAPTER NINE

Amy’s Choice

The escape was chaotic.

The facility shook.

Doors slammed.

Machines poured into the corridors.

Max ordered everyone toward the exit.

Then Amy disappeared.

Max turned around.

“Amy!”

No answer.

He ran back.

Suna grabbed his arm.

“Max!”

“I have to find her!”

“You can’t go alone!”

Luke followed them.

They found Amy inside the laboratory.

She was helping trapped hybrids escape from their cells.

Max stared at her.

“You have to go!”

Amy shook her head.

“Not without them.”

“They’ll kill you!”

“Then help me.”

Max hesitated.

Amy looked directly at him.

“You told me once that protecting people was your job.”

“I remember.”

“Then protect them.”

Max smiled.

“Okay.”

He ran toward the prisoners.

Together they opened the cells.

The hybrids escaped.

And for the first time, Max realized something.

Amy wasn’t someone he needed to protect.

She was someone he could fight beside.

CHAPTER TEN

Luke

Suna and Luke were separated during the escape.

Suna found herself alone in a corridor.

The machines were closing in.

Then Luke appeared.

“Suna!”

She turned.

“Luke!”

He grabbed her hand.

“Come on!”

They ran.

A door slammed shut behind them.

They found themselves trapped inside a storage room.

Luke looked around.

“No exits.”

Suna leaned against the wall.

“We’re trapped.”

Luke sat beside her.

“Then we’re trapped together.”

Suna smiled.

“You always say things like that.”

“What things?”

“Things that make me feel less afraid.”

Luke looked down.

“I like making you feel safe.”

Suna’s cheeks warmed.

“Why?”

Luke looked at her.

“Because I like you.”

Suna froze.

Luke immediately panicked.

“I mean—not just because you’re famous or powerful or anything. I like you because you’re you.”

Suna smiled.

“I like you too.”

Luke blinked.

“Really?”

“Really.”

The door exploded open.

Max’s voice shouted:

“Are you two okay?”

Luke looked at Suna.

“Perfect timing.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The New War

They escaped the laboratory.

But the truth changed everything.

The hybrids weren’t simply fighting humans anymore.

They were fighting the people who had created them.

And somewhere beyond the city, someone was building an army.

Megan.

Max received a transmission that night.

Her face appeared on the screen.

Older.

Harder.

But unmistakable.

“Max.”

He stared.

“Megan.”

“I know what you’ve discovered.”

Max said nothing.

Megan continued.

“The people who created us are preparing something much worse.”

“What?”

“A second transformation.”

Suna stepped forward.

“What does that mean?”

Megan looked directly at her.

“It means they’re going to activate every dormant hybrid gene on Earth.”

Luke whispered:

“Everyone?”

Megan nodded.

“Millions.”

The transmission ended.

Max looked around the room.

Amy stood beside him.

Suna stood beside Luke.

Nobody spoke.

Then Max said:

“Tomorrow, we start preparing.”

Amy took his hand.

Suna looked at Luke.

Luke smiled nervously.

The four of them stood together.

Not as heroes.

Not as soldiers.

As teenagers who had been forced into a war they never asked for.